

HOWARD ADELMAN

Review Article:
The Theory and History of Genocide

MONICA DUFFY TOFT. *The Geography of Ethnic Violence: Identity, Interests, and the Indivisibility of Territory*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003. Pp. xii, 226. \$37.50 (US); ROBERT GELLATELY and BEN KIERNAN, eds. *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. x, 396. \$60.00 (US), cloth; \$22.00 (US), paper; PETER BALAKIAN. *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003. Pp. xx, 475. \$26.95 (US), cloth.

DO WE FIGHT over the dead to protect the graves of our ancestors? Or do we slaughter the Other for land on which to grow crops? Monica Duffy Toft begins her statistical tests of the correlation of state population distribution – urban versus rural; concentrated versus distributed – with conceptions of identity by quoting the Uzbek poet, Cholpan Ergash: 'The Homeland is the remains of our forefathers who turned into dust for this precious soil.' Toft's case studies focus on rocky, hilly regions: Tatarstan, Chechnya, Abkhazia, and Ajaria. The choice, even the paradigm case of Jerusalem that she cites (p. 18), suggests the first rather than the second explanation. However, Peter Balakian's detailed examination of Armenians living in similar terrain for two thousand years falsifies the explanation: they were *not* slaughtered because, immovable, they met the onslaught of Sultan Abdul Hamid II and later the Young Turks, who also regarded the land as indivisible. The indivisible land of Turkey became the pretext for their atrocities against Armenians, most of whom had nothing to do with fomenting partition.

Materially, land is divisible, a useful object to be bought and sold. Spiritually, one's homeland is indivisible, inherent to group identity, a place that holds the spirits of one's ancestors and for which – echoing the Palestinian refugee mantra and the paradigm case – one is willing to die rather 'than lose the hope or right of return' (p. 2). Toft offers a structural explanation for ethnic violence, 'the theory of indivisible territory', which purports to explain why some ethnic conflicts become violent: 'When both sides in a conflict regard control over a disputed territory as indivisible, violence is likely' (p.

2); when they do not, violence is highly unlikely; and when only one side holds such a view, violent conflict is less likely (p. 127). The Russian/Tatar and the Georgian/Ajarian disputes are cases of the second type; these conflicts were resolved without violence. The Russian/Chechen and Georgian/Abkhazian conflicts are cases of the first type; both have been very violent.

The clarity of the claim is puzzling. In Toft's paradigm case, did the Zionists not accept partition in 1948 and the Arabs not reject the United Nations resolution and invade the new state of Israel? Why does violence continue fifty-five years later, when the majority of both Palestinians and Israelis accept a two-state solution? But perhaps Toft is correct after all, for the Oslo agreement broke down at Taba over two issues: sovereignty over the Temple Mount, the key sacred symbol for both groups, and, even more important, over the right of return of the refugees to their original homes. For Toft, the spiritual indivisibility of territory in contrast to its material divisibility explains the violent intra-state conflicts in Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Spain, and Yugoslavia, and even some interstate wars – between Ethiopia and Eritrea, for example – in which the politically dominant ethnic group in each state regards the disputed territory as an essential part of its homeland.

But how many in the state must subscribe to the belief in indivisibility? What if the military, the intelligence service, and the politicians disagree? What are the roles of different élites? Do different élites lead differently, or do they respond to different aspects of the popular will? Is the popular will divisible? For Toft, the views of the rural population, not of cosmopolitans living in cities, are what matter. Thus, though the territory may be taken as indivisible, what also matters is the divisibility of society. In fact, ethnic conflict occurs only when society is divisible – between the cities and the countryside; when two ethnic groups occupy the same rural territory; and, whatever the distribution of the groups throughout the territory, when one ethnic group is concentrated in part of the territory; only then do we find the proneness to violent outcomes.

Does population concentration in rural areas and capability explain holding an indivisibility ideology? If so, then ideology is but a by-product of material circumstances, particularly when one notes that Georgians were more highly concentrated in Abkhazia (almost half the population at 46%) than in Ajaria (only 39%). For Toft, however, the key variable is the fact that Ajars identified themselves as Georgian (Muslim rather than Christian), and did not think of themselves as a separate ethnic group as the Abkhazians did. By contrast, 'violence did not erupt in Czechoslovakia because the stronger actor – the Czech Republic – had nothing to lose (in terms of identity) and much to gain (economically) from Slovak secession. Violence did erupt in Yugoslavia because Serbia, the stronger actor, had nothing to gain and everything to lose, both economically and concerning its identity, by allowing the secessions of Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia' (p. 131). However,

Serb control of the military was a contributing cause of the violence. Thus, even if questions of identity and the distribution of minorities in rural areas, particularly over a long time, do matter, the institutional (Serb control of the army) and the economic conditions of those living in resource-poor regions matter, too.

Toft admits that her explanation requires the overlaying of legitimacy and identity with power (p. 134) and economic scarcity, but does not explain why legitimacy and identity are not overlaid on power and scarcity, or why the four are not given equal weight. Powerful neighbouring states may tip the balance; without Russian support, for example, the Abkhazians were unlikely to have resorted to violence (p. 137). One hears these doubts expressed by Leslie Dwyer and Degung Santikarma in their essay for Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan: 'the inadequacy of our theoretical frameworks to explain the chillingly careful brutality that characterized the violence' (pp. 301-2). In Toft, one longs for the richness of detail in a straightforward historical account.

* * * * *

The subtitle of Gellately and Kiernan's collection, 'Mass Murder in Historical Perspective', promises an historical approach to genocide and mass murder. However, the main title, 'The *Specter* of Genocide', is puzzling. Do Gellately and Kiernan regard intentional non-functional mass murder as a terrifying ghostly presence in everyday life, or as an unreal and exceptional imagined apparition that is a source of dread? Perhaps genocide is carried out by figures resembling Pesh-Chidin in Ron Howard's recent movie, *The Missing*, a figure of extravagantly repulsive, fantastical ugliness and pock-marked evil. Or perhaps in a more banal and less magical realm, genocide is a whimsical residue of the ghosts of Edgar Allen Poe, the haunting presence of death and the abnormal in everyday life; the expression of a latent Freudian death wish for a world in which everything and everyone is dead, as John Updike suggested in 1960 in a short story, 'Pigeon Feathers', in which a farm boy sets out to exterminate the pigeons in the barn. Do Gellately and Kiernan regard genocide as the reduction of spirit into the pursuit of self-sacrifice and death for a corporeal presence that echoes Toft's idolization of the indivisible land as an icon of death?

None of the eighteen essays in the collection even hints at the presence of such a spectre, though several suggest that most rational explanations are inadequate. Edward Kissi's essay on Ethiopia and Cambodia implies that the group named as the enemy to be purged as the Other to cleanse the body politic is selected arbitrarily, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, and even politics. Similarly, Marie Fleming notes: 'Given the contingent and historical nature of genocides, it is virtually impossible to predict them' (p. 113). However, most essays offer versions of rational choice explanations without any sensitivity to a haunting ghostly presence or serendipity.

Four of the essays discuss two of the contrary theses discussed in Toft: genocide as a product of modernity and genocide as a recidivist act resulting from inadequate modernization. These are complemented by three essays on the relationship of colonialism with indigenous populations, and case studies, four earlier (Armenia, Stalin's crimes, the Nazi genocide of the Jews, the Japanese atrocities) and six post-Second World War: the slaughters in Bali in 1965, the genocides by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia under Pol Pot, the slaughters by the Dergue regime under Mengistu Haile Mariam in Ethiopia between 1976 and 1979, the genocide of the Mayan under General Efraín Ríos Montt between 1981 and 1983 in Guatemala as determined by the Historical Clarification Commission, the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 (which the editors considered to be a turning point, without explaining why, p. 7), and the ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1999.

Toft treats genocide as an extreme form of ethnic violence (p. 3). Most of Gellately and Kiernan's contributors, and Balakian, treat it as radically different because of its intent and extent (total extermination), asymmetry, and the fact that mass popular support is not a precondition, though Robert Melson suggests, erroneously, that Rwanda was the exception, for he argues (as discussed later in this essay) that the genocide in Rwanda was supported by the majority of the population. For Omer Bartov (pp. 75-96), who emphasizes continuity, genocide is a product of civilization and the assertion of identity even in the ancient world. Others stress its modernity.

Like Balakian, who is concerned with the United States, only a few of the essays suggest that the role of the bystander is crucial: Gavan McCormack cites US complicity with the Khmer Rouge and John G. Taylor adds Australia. The collection focuses almost exclusively on the perpetrators, their motives (fear and hatred), intentions (extermination, economic gain, expansion of territory), and methods (especially their attempts to conceal their activities, and the extent to which they manipulate the masses or play on irrational fears and prejudices already present to elicit the consent and even involvement of the majority).

Bartov's bottom-up approach is rich in detail. He depicts the metamorphosis of a co-operative community, the Polish town of Buczacz, in which Jews historically constituted the largest group, into one in which the pattern of mass extermination (and exceptional rescue) grew from deeper local, social-cultural roots starting before the Nazi occupation. According to Bartov, 'non-bureaucratic' and 'non-technological' personal acts of murder were common both under Polish rule and the temporary Soviet rule that followed the partition of September 1939. This contrasts implicitly with Hannah Arendt's thesis about the bureaucratic, and, hence, banal, and high-tech nature of the Nazi genocide generally said to be characteristic of the Holocaust.

Why is modernity, then, the 'scourge' and 'the Moloch to be feared'? Fleming echoes Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno's conception of

'the instrumental rationality of the Enlightenment' with its capitalist system and bureaucratic organization. Add, in the twentieth century, the concept of total war, in which civilians are both the main victims and also, with industrialization, the key to support for the war effort. The masses are enlisted through mimetic repetition of rituals, uniforms, drum beats, words, and gestures. Abetted by historical prejudice, opportunism, and the quest for nationalist identity, technological innovation in communications, surveillance, and transportation, combined with modern state bureaucracy, genocide is made possible over a vast territory (Eric D. Weitz, pp. 53-4).

But there is more to it. Modern mass murder requires that the victim be dehumanized, made anonymous, and the act concealed in imitation of the disappearance of the public spectacle of punishment behind the prison wall that Michel Foucault documented and whose theories Fleming dissects. By contrast, historical mass exterminations, sometimes echoed in modern mass deportations and slaughters, were applauded and publicized to instil fear in others and facilitate domination; when individual victims were sacrificed, their quality boosted the reputations of the killers. One is reminded of the boasts of the Butcher in the film *The Gangs of New York*, whose traditional mode of slaughter contrasts with modern anonymous modes adumbrated by the American Civil War, the background to the film, and the slaughter through which the modern organized bureaucracy represses the riots in New York that end the film.

Fleming, who introduces a dissenting footnote to the modernist thesis in a reference to Jean-François Lyotard, suggests that accusations levelled against Jews for engaging in forbidden magic and bloody ritual were deep-seated projections of a desire to regress to archaic practices of sacrifice (p. 101), projections that provide the societal and cultural bases for popular support. Pre-modern human sacrifice or mass murder was considered to be a moral act furthering a spiritual mission, unlike the modern service to further a utopian cause. The latter was accomplished either through expressing a spirit already embedded in the *Volk*, or by a material purification of the people from that which interfered with their fullest self-realization.

Hence, the stress in many of the essays on the four horses of the modern apocalypse – race, rape, *raum*, and revolution – though Kiernan (p. 29) replaces rape with religion and revolution with Toft's emphasis on the soil and attachment to an indivisible homeland, treated as a feature of the modernist revolutionary ideology concerning land in an increasingly mobile and transitional world. Weitz and Melson see only three constants: warfare, race, and revolution. The 1999 Report of the Historical Clarification Commission on Guatemala on the atrocities committed against the Mayan people by the state apparatus during the civil war, ongoing since 1954 (*Memory of Silence*, February 1999), the results of which Greg Grandin summarizes, includes only exclusive racism, and adds economics and political authoritarianism. In contrast, Jacques Semelin, in looking at Yugoslavia, stresses 'mass rape and

the profanation of graves' (p. 369), and challenges rational functionalist attempts at explanation.

Whatever the number and the categories selected, they are apocalyptic horsemen because, unlike Plato's two horses of the passions and the spirit of courage, which are harnessed together because courage can listen to reason while the passions cannot, these four horses are inherently contradictory and pull in four different directions.

In the biological division of humanity into a hierarchy of people, blood is transformed from the essence of life into an abstraction that defines an ideal homogeneous body politic in a land that is one and indivisible, despite humans living in a world that is, and needs to be, biologically heterogeneous. The paradox is that rape is used as a tool of purification. On the one hand, rape denies the ideal and helps to ensure heterogeneity; on the other hand, it does so only by debasing the sexual act to carnality. This biological reduction to propagation and mortality, in what Foucault termed a 'society of sex', displaces the discourse of a 'society of blood' in a culture that emphasizes prudery and wholesomeness of the family; and is, at its base, homosexual rather than heterosexual.

Raum, which derives from colonialist claims to cultural and racial superiority that legitimize violence, is exemplified in the treatment of aboriginal peoples by European colonizers. Isabel V. Hull ties colonialism to genocide in South-West Africa: German military practices favouring final solutions led to the slaughter of between 75 and 80 per cent of the Herero and 45 to 50 per cent of the Nama. If Hull situates colonialism and extermination in the habits and assumptions embedded in a military culture shielded from civilian oversight, and free to use unlimited force to solve problems, Elazar Barkan echoes Mark Cocker's argument¹ that native peoples partly self-destructed on account of their fissiparous and tribalized societies, ritualized warfare, and inefficient weapons (p. 84).

John G. Taylor challenges the hypothesis of shared responsibility in an account of Indonesia's use in 1975 of unrestrained force in the conquest of East Timor, that destroyed one-third of the population. The event is attributable not only to the absence of domestic civilian oversight of the military but also to international indifference, and even complicity. Intervention took place in 1999 owing to the combination of a radical change in the domestic politics of Indonesia – the overthrow of Suharto in 1998 – with an economic crisis that required international aid and the shift to military interventionism by the United States and Australia after 11 September 2001.

If *raum* stresses unbounded terrain for future expansion, revolution's ideological utopianism harks back to a purified ancestral homeland in a fantasized rural past. At the same time, it mobilizes the masses to serve the industrial state's policies on education, economic development, and exter-

¹ M. Cocker, *Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold: Europe's Conquest of Indigenous Peoples* (London, 1998).

mination that destroy the substance of the inherited culture, and leave only its shell as an object of worship; rituals of violence and murder become the essence of its being in its obsession with pests, pollution, purgation, and purity.

Balakian in his book, and Jay Winter in his essay, apply the analogy of the Holocaust to the Armenian genocide, ideologically, intellectually, and instrumentally. Winter argues that, only by understanding the events of 1915, can we understand the new kind of total war against a civilian population fought under the cover of an interstate war. Balakian, who shares the view (cf. p. 180), also demonstrates that the events of 1915, especially the work of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), continued a trend traced back through the pre-war slaughters in 1909, the extermination plans made by Abdul Hamid II, to the mass murders of the 1890s 'motivated by Islamic fanaticism and a *jihad* mentality' (p. 112), organized by Muslim clerics, imams, and *softas*. They were abetted by the US envoy, Alexander Watson Terrell, who rationalized the mass murder as the sultan's attempt to 'cleanse his empire from filth and disease' owing to his concern 'for the health of his people' (p. 120). Such attitudes neutralized men such as James Bryce, Regius Professor of Civil Law at Oxford University, who had issued warnings in both a speech at Harvard in 1881 and in an article published in *Century Magazine* in 1895, when he was under-secretary for foreign affairs in the earl of Rosebery's administration. Balakian demonstrates that total war is only a condition for allowing genocide to become total and not for genocide to occur.

As Nicolas Werth shows of the centrally organized famine in the Ukraine, northern Caucasus, and Kazakhstan of 1932-3, and the Great Terror of 1937-8, and as Leslie Dwyer and Degung Santikarma show of the slaughter in 1965 of a million people in Indonesia in the project of 'cleaning Communism from the national body politic' (p. 295), organized, systematic mass murder does not require the cover of total war, only an exercise in social engineering by a ruthless despot indifferent to the ethnic composition of those being killed. Gellately portrays the Nazi persecution between 1933 and 1939 as equally arbitrary: interstate war simply enables a despot to avoid both domestic and foreign scrutiny.

The test for the validity of this idea should be Melson's study of Rwanda. He is the foremost proponent of the theory that, in addition to a racist ideology, genocide is the product of war, which both provides cover and so forestalls internal criticism and, ostensibly, forecloses the alternative of expulsion (not foreclosed in Rwanda), and of revolution, which legitimates the events. Even though Melson sometimes limits the applicability of the theory to 'some important cases' (p. 335), usually 'revolution and war ... proved decisive for enabling ideological motivations to be translated into policies of genocide' (p. 326).

The essay, though, is marred by mistakes. For example, Melson states:

'One of the long-run effects of the Rwandan revolution was to set off a vicious spiral of ever-increasing violence between Tutsi guerrilla forces operating abroad and the Rwandan state, as well as a government-sponsored campaign against domestic Rwandan Tutsis that culminated in the genocide of 1994' (p. 332). But the so-called 'vicious spiral' did not occur: the violence from Tutsi based abroad had been defeated by 1966, within four years of the consolidation of the revolution and Rwanda's independence. Further, the persecution of – not discrimination against – the domestic Tutsi population stopped with Major-General Juvénal Habyarimana's coup in 1973, as Melson acknowledges. The violence against the domestic Tutsi started again in 1990 after the invasion of Rwanda in October by the Tutsi-led Rwanda Patriotic Front (not, as Melson depicts it, the commencement of operations 'that would ultimately lead to the invasion of the country' (p. 333).

Correcting such mistakes should strengthen rather than weaken Melson's theory that the cover of war is a necessary condition for genocide, though at the cost of the theory on the relationship with revolution. There was no necessary connection between the revolutionary ideology of Hutu majority rule, underpinned by a doctrine of race inherited from the Belgians, and the genocide of the Tutsi. The revitalizing of society by a new system of legitimization occurred neither in 1990 nor in 1994, nor by mass participation. Melson claims that the participation of the 'majority of the population' as willing executioners was unique to the Rwanda genocide (p. 337). Further, Melson claims that the majority of Hutus joined in the slaughter (p. 333); the more reliable figure is 10 per cent. 'Tens of thousands' (p. 334) do not make a majority of three or four million. Nor does citing Liisa Malkki help: her study compared how an anti-Tutsi paranoid racist ideology was reinforced in a Burundian refugee camp environment with the way it dissipated in an urban environment.¹

* * * * *

The three books throw suspicion on any formulaic explanation of the causes of mass murder and genocide. They suggest that some combination of the following is present: depictions of the Other designed to exclude, and efforts, such as rape, to destroy its reproductive capacity; attempts to reify one's own homeland; authoritarian leadership fostered by economic downturn; a revolutionary ideology; and the cover of war. They are better illustrated by deep historical study than by a simplified theory derived from and applied to a small number of fixed elements.

¹ L. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago, 1995).